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End the Drama, Find Peace: New Rules for Dealing With an Over-Emotional Ex

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"I want to co-parent with my ex, but his emails are out of control! Last week he sent a ten-pager - ten *words* of which were about the kids. How can I make him understand I don't want to talk about 'us' anymore?"

"My ex hates that I'm dating. She calls incessantly to "check in." If she can't reach me, she leaves messages telling me what a bad father I am!"

"Last night my ex texted to ask what I was feeding the kids for dinner. Before I knew it I'd fired back: 'None of your damn business!'"

Sound familiar?

It might not make logical sense, but it's true: If your ex pounces on every opportunity to lure you into a fraught exchange, they're having a hard time letting go. After all, if they can keep you emotionally engaged -- even against your will -- they can avoid the painful awareness that you're no longer a couple.

Fighting is an intimate act.

The fact that we now have so many ways to be "in touch" is a double-edged sword for divorcing parents.

On the one hand, electronic communications (voicemail, text, email) offer a more controlled alternative to in-person contact -- helpful if you can't be civil in each other's presence. On the other hand, they're loaded with potential problems. Electronic communications:

- Allow a needy spouse to be in too-frequent contact
- Allow an angry spouse a forum for unfettered verbal attack

- Are notoriously easy to misinterpret
- Establish an unhelpful expectation of immediate response ("It's been a full *hour* of radio silence!")
- Allow for impulsive, destructive responses without offering the possibility of quick repair (ever wish you had a magic "I take it back" button on your keyboard?)

If you're co-parenting with an ex who's hell-bent on pulling you into unproductive, upsetting communications, you're facing a challenge.

It's tough, but with practice you can learn to avoid being sucked into the vortex.

You need some New Rules:

New Rule #1: Know Thyself

We all have pesky vulnerabilities in our characters which, when activated, throw our emotion into overdrive and our judgment into idle. And no one knows your soft spots better than your ex. If you're someone who craves approval, a zinger like "Everyone knows what a terrible person you are for leaving this family!" will send your heart rate through the roof. If your sense of guilt is over-developed, a well-aimed "I hope you can live with yourself -- our kids will never be able to trust anyone again!" may plunge you into depression. Learn your trigger points, so you can resist rising to the bait.

New Rule #2: Adopt "The Boundaried Response"

When it comes to communicating with an over-emotional ex, most of us err in one of two directions:

Mistake #1: The Defensive Response

The recipient responds with irrelevant, wordy rationalizations that invite further attacks. Watch out for this if you're insecure or conflict averse.

Mistake #2: The Retaliatory Response

The recipient responds with sarcasm and/or counter-accusations, thus upping the ante. Watch out for this if you're quick-tempered or still hurt and angry.

What we are aiming for is:

#3: The Boundaried Response

The recipient ignores all emotional content and responds only to relevant child-related issues -- using few words and a neutral, business-like tone.

This response establishes appropriate limits and sets the stage for healthier communication in the future.

To give you the idea, here's an example of a provocative email followed by Defensive, Retaliatory, and (finally) Boundaried responses:

The Provocative Email:

"When I picked Tommy up from school today he had a fever. I took him to the doctor -- he has strep. Apparently he told you this morning that he didn't feel well. What kind of mother takes a sick child to school just so she can get to work on time?"

The Defensive Response:

"Last night Tommy had a cough and a slight sniffle. I asked him how he felt and he said 'fine.' I took his temperature and it was one hundred degrees. I told myself I'd wait until morning to decide what to do. This morning his temperature was normal. I considered calling the doctor, but Tommy said he didn't want to miss his science presentation today. I resent your insinuation that I'm not a good mother because I made a different judgment call than you would!"

The Retaliatory Response:

"Sorry you had to take time off from watching ESPN to take your son to the doctor, but someone has to make a living."

The Boundaried Response:

"Tommy seemed fine this morning, slight sniffle. Sorry about the strep. I'll give him a call later to check in. Tomorrow's my day, so let me know if you're keeping him home from school so we can coordinate pick-up. I'll assume you're sending him with meds unless I hear otherwise."

New Rule #3: Don't answer the phone

If your ex's number shows up on caller ID, let it go to voicemail *every time*. Then check the message right away. If it's your kids (or a true emergency), call back. If it's a rant, ignore it.

New Rule #4: If every call is a rant, tell your ex you'll only respond to written communications.

New Rule #5: Set a communication protocol

Ask your ex if he/she prefers email or text (don't offer telephone), and stick to that format. Tell him or her you'll respond to child-related communications within twenty-four hours, then do.

New Rule #6: Ignore petty communications

A text such as: "Sally arrived home with filthy hair. There's this new product called 'shampoo,' ever heard of it?" requires no response.

New Rule #7: Impose a mandatory waiting period

When replying to a provocative email, wait at least one hour before pressing "send." After you've calmed down (assuming you still want to reply), edit aggressively -- using The Boundaried Response as your guide. If your second draft is one-tenth the length of the original, you're in the zone.

Finally...

New Rule #8: Give yourself a break

Divorce is rough, and you're only human -- you *will* get pulled into old dynamics once in a while. When you find yourself in a fruitless tug of war with your ex, breathe -- then let go of the rope.